

Phil 4304 Aesthetics  
Thomas Aquinas

Nine centuries lie between Augustine and Aquinas. During that period of time, the remains of classical culture — the dialogues of Plato and the metaphysical and physical works of Aristotle — disappeared.

One reason for that was because in the middle of the third century, Latin began to replace Greek as the official language of the liturgy and many of the ancient masterpieces gradually became inaccessible.

Furthermore, a great deal of Roman literature and poetics also passed from view, especially because of the suppression of any form of paganism by Christian authorities.

Only when in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries that the classical documents were brought forth did medieval thinkers begin to draw again on the thought of the Greeks and Romans, a fact that gave impetus to the synthetic/scholastic work of Aquinas.

In this interim period, however, several thinkers kept the aesthetic thought of Augustine alive, with its focus on unity, equality, number, order, etc. Those thinkers included:

1. John Scotus Eriugena or Erigena (9<sup>th</sup> century): he also discussed the moral preparation of a person to perceive beauty, for example, the different responses to a beautiful vase by both a good man and one who is a prey to his own concupiscent desires.
2. Hugh of St. Victor(12<sup>th</sup> century): classified various types or species of beauty and argued that all of man's senses find appropriate aesthetic qualities to enjoy in the natural world, that all five senses are capable of apprehending beauty, for example, suggesting that there are such things as beautiful tastes and smells.
3. St. Bonaventure (13<sup>th</sup> century): based on the text in James that God is the Father of Lights, argues that He is the source of all illumination which may be distinguished into four categories:

External light = the light of mechanical skill: **arts and crafts**

Lower light = the light of sense perception: natural forms

Inner light = the light of philosophical knowledge: intellectual truth

Higher light = the light of grace and Sacred Scripture: saving truth

Into this milieu stepped Thomas Aquinas (1225-74), Italian Dominican friar whose philosophy and theology have decisively shaped Catholic (and Western) thought.

He was born into an aristocratic Italian family whom he disappointed by failing to enter into the affluent Benedictine Order and instead became a friar in the new founded Dominican Order of Preachers.

Under the tutelage of Albert the Great in Cologne, he began to study Aristotle and later became a leading figure at the University of Paris, and at the papal court.

He died on his way to the Council of Lyons and in 1323 was canonized.

He is regarded as the greatest of the medieval philosophers, given the scale and variety of his intellectual and literary achievements.

His primary achievement was to work out a synthesis between Catholicism and philosophy, esp. Aristotle.

TA believed in the idea of cumulative philosophical and religious wisdom and so sought to combine neo-platonism, Augustinianism, Anselmianism, Aristotelianism, patristic thought, Scripture, and the teachings of the Catholic church.

He of course was a prodigious writer. His unfinished magnum opus, *Summa Theologica*, runs to 60 volumes. Plus he wrote many other treatises and commentaries, giving his critics something to think and write about until the present.

On aesthetics, while he offers remarks on the nature of beauty, God and beauty, and the arts, he has no treatises on these subjects or any well developed, comprehensive theories.

Still, as our readings indicate, it is possible to extract from his writing selections of enduring interest for philosophical aesthetics.

The most important sources are his remarks on aesthetics come from the following sources:

1. *Summa Theologica*
2. *Exposition of Aristotle's ethics*
3. *On the Sentences*
4. *Against the Attackers of the Religious Life*
5. *Exposition of Dionysius on the Divine Names*
6. *Exposition of Aristotle's Politics*

**Hence, some of the basic themes in Thomistic aesthetics according to our reading are the following:**

1. There is an identity between the beautiful and the good in concrete existences because both are based on form. Hence, the beautiful is the good and the good is the beautiful. 262
2. And yet how these two things make their appeal are different. 262-63
  - a. **How the good makes its appeal:** since the good is what all desire, it appeals to the appetite, and has the character of an end or goal, that at which life aims. Appetite finds its rest in the good.
  - b. **How the beautiful makes its appeal:** the beautiful appeals not to appetite but to the cognitive power, for the beautiful consists in due proportion and properly belongs to the intelligible character of the formal cause, and which when perceived gives pleasure and is called beautiful. Cognition finds its rest in the beautiful.

1.) Those sense powers that are most cognitive, viz., sight and hearing as servants of reason, are chiefly concerned with the beautiful, hence beautiful sights and beautiful sounds, but not beautiful tastes and odors.

2.) So the good satisfies appetite, but the beautiful gives pleasure when apprehended.

BUT IT IS NOT BEAUTIFUL BECAUSE IT GIVES PLEASURE, BUT IT GIVES PLEASURE BECAUSE IT IS BEAUTIFUL, that is, it has proper form.

WHAT, THEN, IS BEAUTIFUL or proper form?

3. Three items are required for beauty (263):
  - a. Integrity or perfection: things that are broken lack integrity or perfection; integrity is wholeness, being all there. What is defective is ugly.
  - b. Due proportion or harmony: = a certain proper relation of one quantity to another, of one thing to another, and in art may refer to the parts in relation to the whole, and the work of art itself to its model.

- c. Brilliance or clarity: = bright color, light and lucid splendor of form shining on the proportioned parts of the matter.
- 4. Three implications (264):
  - a. God is beautiful as the cause of the integrity, harmony and clarity of things.
  - b. Bodily beauty is attributed to the fact that a person has well proportioned bodily members and has due brilliance of coloration.
  - c. Spiritual beauty means a person's behavior or activity is well proportioned according to a spiritual meaning or brilliance.
- 5. The beautiful gives pleasure when apprehended, but pleasures are of different kinds (pleasure always increases activity, for if we enjoy something, we do it more often or better or more intensely). 265
 

Appropriate pleasures increase activity while inappropriate (foreign) pleasures decrease it.

  - a. The greater pleasure/activity drives out the lesser pleasure/activity (organ music over preaching, if you really like organ music).
  - b. We can do only one thing if we really derive pleasure from it; but we can do more than one thing if the pleasure accompanying an act is moderate (watch a show and eat popcorn).
  - c. Pleasures differ greatly from each other, some help and others hinder.
- 6. Aristotle adds an additional quality/requirement to beauty: a large body (266-67)
  - a. According to Dionysius, 2 aspects concur in the intelligible meaning of beauty: harmony and brilliance and God is the cause of all beauty because he is the cause of all harmony and brilliance.
  - b. Aristotle adds a 3<sup>rd</sup> aspect to these: beauty is present only in a large body.
  - c. Hence, small men may be well proportioned and pretty but not beautiful because of lack of magnitude.
- 7. Aristotle also says that virtuous actions are not only pleasurable but also beautiful and good (267)

- a. They are pleasurable in relation to the agent by means of habituation.
  - b. They are beautiful because of a due order of circumstances, as of certain parts.
  - c. They are good because they are directed to a proper end.
8. Aristotle also says that external goods (health, beauty, children, etc) are necessary for the beauty of happiness (267)
- a. External goods make a person pleasing in the eyes of others.
  - b. To be deprived of external goods defiles happiness since their lack makes a person contemptible in the eyes of others (e.g., those who lack nobility, good offspring, bodily beauty)
  - c. Happiness is diminished, along with its beauty, if certain external goods be lacking (if one is ugly and contemptible in the eyes of others).
9. According to TA, there are two types or kinds of beauty: spiritual and physical (268)
- a. Spiritual beauty consists is the proper ordering and abundance of spiritual goods. Hence, lack of spiritual goods or internal disorder is shameful and ugly.
  - b. Physical beauty consists of due ordering of the body and an abundance of external goods related to the body. Disorder of the body or lack of temporal things is shameful and ugly.
  - c. Spiritual and physical beauty arouse desire, so does ugliness arouse shame (coming from being a pauper, deformities, ignorance, disordered actions, etc.)
  - d. Interior ugliness is always held in contempt giving rise to shame and is disapproved.
  - e. Exterior ugliness and lack of external goods, however, is also condemned but sometimes it is assumed by holy people for the sake of Christ and should not always be disapproved of; in fact, in assuming a lack of external goods in humility for Christ's sake is to be praised. For example, mendicancy for Christ's sake, despite the shame associated with it, is to be praised greatly.

10. God is the supersubstantial beautiful, the most beautiful and the superbeautiful and He is called Beauty. 269

- a. If anything is called beautiful, it is because God gives beauty to all things in accord with its nature and limitations; beauty is handed down to things from God and anything beautiful participates in beauty and the divine beauty participates in things.
- b. This applies to the beauty of body and spirit, for these things possess harmony or proportion and brilliance.

11. How beauty is predicated of God. 270

- a. First, beauty is predicated of God by way of excess, both within and beyond the divine nature, so He is both most beautiful and superbeautiful
- b. Second, because he possesses none of the deficiencies of beauty that obtain in creatures, namely the following: (1) variability as in corruptible things, for he is neither generated nor corrupted; (2) particular beauty as in particular things with particular natures, for God is not beautiful in one part, time, aspect, place, but is beautiful in all without qualification, as a whole, always, and everywhere. God is beautiful according to himself and is uniformly beautiful.

12. How beauty is predicated of God causally. 272

- a. God is the beginning of all beautiful things, esp. in their brilliance and harmony.
- b. God is the beginning of all beautiful things as their efficient, moving, and containing
- c. God is the end of all beautiful things as their final cause, in imitation of their divine beauty.
- d. God is the model of all beautiful things as their exemplary cause

13. God as beautiful is also the cause of the good and thus the beautiful and the good are the same. 273

14. God as the beautiful and good is also the source of the substantial essences of all existents, including their being, unity, order and rest and movement. 274

15. God is responsible for the order of things, and their diversification, adaptability, their mutual assistance and their proportion. 275
16. Aquinas defines art right reasoning concerning works that are to be made; art is unrelated to human appetite or will or disposition, but a good work, an operative habit. 278
- a. Just as if a geometer makes a true demonstration, it doesn't matter what his disposition is (joyful/angry), and the same is true for the artist: art thus has the rational character of a virtue in the same way a speculative habit does.
  - b. When an artist produces a bad artifact, it is not a work of art, just as a lie is not knowledge.
  - c. To make good use of a work of art requires a good will and must be perfected by virtue; some moral virtue is necessary for the good use art.
  - d. Speculative habits directed to rational works are called arts, liberal arts and these are distinguished from arts performed by the body
17. Art is to be distinguished from prudence.280
- a. Art is right reason regarding things to be made.
  - b. Prudence is right reason regarding actions to be done.
  - c. To make and to act are different things, the former out of external matter, the latter by means of an agent. But both are perfected reason in regard to the objects to which they are related.
18. Art imitates nature; artistic operations imitate nature and art products must imitate things in nature. 281